

Response to Regnault

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The article by Jean-Marc Regnault on “The Nuclear Issue in the South Pacific” calls for a few reservations about the way it approaches the French nuclear tests in French Polynesia.¹

THE “ANGLOPHONE PLOT”

In this article, the author upholds the tired thesis of the “Anglophone plot” against the French presence in the Pacific. Thus he considers that the reactions to the installation of the Pacific Testing Center (CEP) in the early 1960s came from New Zealand and Australia and that if the Tahitian pastors intervened in the debate, it was only, in the words of General de Gaulle (cited without giving the source) because they had been stirred up against France by the English and American pastors.

This representation is contrary to reality, to which one is astonished that Regnault judged it useless to refer. On 7 September 1966 in Papeete, Deputy of Polynesia John Teariki pronounced a very virulent indictment against the nuclear tests in front of General de Gaulle, who came to “push the button” of the next blast over Moruroa.² As for knowing whether the Polynesian representatives of the era had been influenced by the “anti-nuclear” New Zealanders or Australians, it is necessary to advise Regnault to ask one of the last surviving representatives of this era, Mr Jean-Baptiste Cérans-Jérusalem, who recalls that, not understanding English, the Polynesian representatives had hardly any contacts in the Anglophone countries of the Pacific.

The questioning of the “Tahitian pastors” is still more crass. Is it necessary to recall—again a work not cited by Regnault—that the sociological inquiry conducted among the former workers on Moruroa in 1996

showed that the Evangelical Church was very divided about the CEP installation and that some pastors urged their own parishioners to go to work on Moruroa.³ It was only in 1982 that the Evangelical Church pronounced itself firmly against the tests. In contrast, one of the first religious leaders to criticize the French nuclear tests in Polynesia was Pastor Jean Adnet. In 1966, moreover, this French pastor was “exiled” from Tahiti for over six months on the orders of the Elysée [ie, the French presidency], and it required a personal intercession by the president of the Protestant Federation of France to General de Gaulle to enable Adnet to regain his pastoral post in Tahiti. We are thus far from the “Anglophone plot” for which the Evangelical Church would be the Trojan Horse—a thesis largely inspired by historical fantasies that to this day fuel tensions between the French administration and the Polynesian protestants.⁴

Unfamiliar with the Protestant Church from that missionary era before its autonomy in 1963, Regnault can only reproduce writings that others like himself want to believe. Certainly due to this ignorance, he passes over in complete silence the preoccupations of the Protestant Church from 1958 to 1963 and reconstructs the history of the Evangelical Church in his own way.

PROTESTANT “OBSCURANTISM”

Regnault would have us believe that the Protestant Church’s position on the nuclear issue is of an “obscurantist” type, based on Oceanian myths and religious convictions, although in reality, atomic weapons should only be considered as “instruments of deterrence.”

In this area, Regnault’s proposals show a distrust of the theological reflections of churches—not only Protestant—on themes linked to respect for the environment, notably the ecumenical work developed in the conciliatory process “Justice, Peace and Safeguarding Creation” (JPSC). The churches of the entire world, not only the Pacific, endorse this “Theology of Life,” which questions the very principle of weapons of mass destruction. Is it illegitimate for a church—especially a church implanted where nuclear tests take place—to occupy itself with the health and future of the people to whom it is sent, or must we consider such preoccupations a sign of ignorance and obscurantism?

In presenting the opposition of the churches and countries of the Pacific to nuclear arms that they consider “instruments of total destruction” and not “instruments of deterrence,” Regnault obscures factual reality. Con-

trary to the nuclear doctrines that circulate far from the sites of experimentation, the nuclear tests conducted by the nuclear powers in the Pacific—United States, United Kingdom, France—were real nuclear explosions that, even if they were not inflicted on civilian populations as in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, nevertheless had impacts on the environment and health. We understand easily that Pacific peoples do not have the same remote, “intellectual” concept of nuclear deterrence as the strategists of the nuclear powers, who have only slogans for attributing to nuclear weapons a role in preserving the peace.

AGAIN THE THESIS OF THE HARMLESSNESS OF THE TESTS

Regnault attempts, finally, to legitimize the unvarying discourse of the French authorities since 1960 about the purported “harmlessness of the nuclear tests.” For that he relies on “the somewhat reassuring IAEA report,” whose seven volumes he has probably not consulted.⁵ In fact, this report included no study of the health of the personnel who had participated in the nuclear testing programs at Moruroa and Fangataufa. The International Atomic Energy Agency contented itself with deducing, by means of analyzing samples of soils, water, vegetation, and animals taken from the test sites, that there was no risk to health.

The first “human” research on the health and environmental consequences of the nuclear tests was conducted by the sociological inquiry among the former Polynesian workers, sponsored by the nongovernmental organization Hiti Tau and the Evangelical Church of French Polynesia, and published in 1997 under the title *Moruroa and Us*.⁶ A team of French epidemiologists produced a study on the rate and mortality of cancer in French Polynesia, financed by the Ministry of Defense; the results of this study were interpreted as proof of the absence of health impact by the nuclear tests on the Polynesian population.⁷ However, in the conclusion of their study the epidemiologists acknowledged that they had not had access to the medical data of the civilian and medical personnel who worked on the nuclear sites, who must be considered the principal “people at risk.” Finally, the Association of Veterans of French Nuclear Testing—with nearly 2,000 members—produced a study showing that the rate of incidence or mortality by cancer among its members is double that of the general French population.⁸

Regnault also mentions the “highly critical reviews” of the Nuclear

Arms Observatory (OBSARM). In reality, these reviews consist of studies and works by the Center for Documentation and Research on Peace and Conflicts (CDRPC), the only independent French organization working for almost twenty years on the consequences of the nuclear tests.⁹ The CDRPC studies question the thesis of harmlessness of the tests, which is defended today only by the French administration. Recall for example that since 1988 the United States has a legislative apparatus, relying on the principle of presumption of origin, for an evolving list of twenty-one cancer cases, for which individuals, including the veterans and populations living or having lived near the test sites, can declare themselves up to forty years after the nuclear tests.

We do not challenge the recognized scientific competence of this French university professor in the Pacific. However, we regret that, on the question of the French nuclear tests, he has contented himself with repeating official arguments without any critical thought, thereby supporting those theses with the authority that the body of his academic work confers on them.

Notes

1 We will not address the other themes in this article about which we do not contest the author's analysis.

2 Cited in the book *Moruroa Mon Amour*, by Bengt and Marie-Thérèse Danielsson (Paris: Stock, 1974, 176–185). This reference work on the period of the CEP installation and the atmospheric nuclear tests is oddly neglected in Regnault's article. The Danielssons showed in fact that the Polynesian representatives of this period opposed from the beginning the "nuclear colonialism" of France.

3 This inquiry was conducted by two Dutch sociologists and published in French, English, German and Maohi: *Moruroa et Nous*, by Pieter de Vries and Hans Seur (Lyon: Éditions CDRPC, 1997).

4 The thesis of an "anti-French" Polynesian Protestant Church is developed in an article by Lieutenant-Colonel Juventin on "L'Influence politique de l'Église Évangélique en Polynésie française" (The Political Influence of the Evangelical Church in French Polynesia), published in *La Tribune du CID* (Collège Interarmées de Défense), number 30, and accessible by permission via the CID Web site <www.college.interarmees.defense.gouv.fr>

5 The two authors of this reply were present in Vienna, Austria, from 30 June

to 3 July 1998, at the conference of experts where these reports were given. John Taroanui Doom was the only Polynesian present.

6 This study, which for the first time asked Polynesians about the question of the nuclear tests, is also oddly neglected by Regnault. See note 3.

7 See *Mortalité par cancer en Polynésie française entre 1984 et 1992*, by Béatrice Le Vu and Florent de Vathaire, published by the French Institute of Health and Medical Research (Paris: INSERM, 1994); and *Incidence des cancers en Polynésie française entre 1985 et 1995*, by Florent de Vathaire, Béatrice Le Vu, Cécile Challeton-de-Vathaire, undated. See also the 2000 article, "Cancer Incidence in French Polynesia 1985–95," by Béatrice Le Vu, Florent de Vathair, Cécile Challeton de Vathair, John Paofaite, Laurent Rod, Gilles Soubira, François Lhoumeau, and François Laudon (*Tropical Medicine and International Health* 5 [10]); abstract available at <<http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/links/doi/10.1046/j.1365-3156.2000.00624.x/enhancedabs/>>.

8 See details on the website <<http://www.aven.org>>.

9 Regnault does not cite any of the books published on the subject by the Center for Documentation and Research on Peace and Conflicts, including the most recent by Bruno Barrillot: *L'Héritage de la bombe* (Lyon: Éditions CDRPC, 2002); and *Les Essais nucléaires et la santé* (Lyon: Éditions CDRPC, 2002).